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The Messiness of Theorising Childhood

The development of the Children and Childhoods SIG was undertaken in recognition of the complexities involved in researching with children, of their lives and the 'messiness' of the concept of childhood. Indeed, the need for theorizing in the social study of childhood is of significant concern with calls to move beyond the naming of concepts to empirical analysis. Priscilla Alderson (2016) argues for child research that bridges the gap between dualisms, urging childhood researchers to move away from description to concentrate on empirical work that is focused on people in the actuality of their lives and explicates "why". Leena Alanen in discussing 'intersectionality' argues, 'the challenge [is] that intersectional thinking appears to be a similar thought experiment in the case of children as it is in the case of women' (Alanen, 2016: 159). In this she recognises both the epistemological diversity and complexity of standpoint in feminist theorising, and the messiness for the social study of childhood taking up these concepts and ideas.

Similarly, Jens Qvortrup (2016) argues that the social studies of childhood is "crying out" for a theoretical home. However, to embed this in theories of class, race, gender and so on is insufficient since this excludes certain categories of children in their empirical and analytical work. Hammersley (2016) raises concerns that particular differences are played down in childhood research, specifically biological differences between children themselves and children and adults. He further argues that there is a tendency towards constructionism, agency and participatory methods which, however important and significant the debates, "involve inconsistencies and tensions that vitiate their capacity to form a coherent and effective approach" (Hammersley, 2016: 11). This all raises several important questions including who and for what purposes decisions about children's lives and childhood are made and what is the standpoint of the researcher and research in predominant institutional categorising? The demand is to move beyond describing categories and experiences to understand and theorize the processes of construction as they are experienced and taken up by children.

This is a challenge in our empirical work in the contemporary political climate. Today, children live and researcher's work under more restrictions than ever. There is double exclusion for children (Alderson 2016) because of the theoretical deficit, when children are confined to limiting discussion between childhood academics in and beyond childhood conferences or academic papers, and not represented otherwise. One aim of the SIG is therefore to raise questions about how children and young people are theorized and represented. We do this both at the conference, in our liaison with BERA and other SIGs and through seminar events involving national and international scholars. We welcome new members who want to discuss their conceptual and empirical work and also those who are interested in the boundaries between child, children and childhood.

Alanen L (2016) Editorial: 'Intersectionality' and other challenges to theorizing childhood. *Childhood* 23(2): 157–161.

Alderson P (2016) Intergenerational Justice: Hope, Action, Change, Continuity. In: *Keynote lecture delivered at the Children and Young People in a Changing World: Action: Agency and Participation*, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, 23-24 June 2016.

Hammersley M (2016) Childhood Studies: A sustainable paradigm? *Childhood* Published online before print February 23, 2016, doi: 10.1177/0907568216631399.

Qvortrup J (2016) Childhood – A part of the generational order? In: *Keynote lecture delivered at the Children and Young People in a Changing World: Action: Agency and Participation*, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, 23-24 June 2016.

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